

Opening Story: Meditating in Winter

My senior year in college I began to more frequently experiment with meditation. As a theology major I was interested in stories about mystics who were able to train their body to withstand extreme heat or cold. I wanted to see if I too could get into a deep state of meditation so I wouldn't notice the cold. After winter had set in, I would go and meditate under a tree out in the woods behind campus. My first few attempts were unsuccessful and my thoughts would continue to cycle back to being cold. Finally, one day I went out under the tree, took my shirt off, and meditated for 15 minutes. Can you imagine the look on someone's face had they seen me? They would have thought, "What in the world is this crazy person doing." :) But to my surprise I wasn't cold at all. When my alarm went off to signal for me to come out of meditation, I got up, put my shirt back on, and started to walk back to campus. I was feeling elated that I had achieved what I had set out to do. But on the walk back within a few minutes I started to feel cold again.

What I "achieved" was temporary. What I was after was a spiritual experience for the sake of the experience. To see how deep in meditation I could go and where that might take me.

That was my mindset some 15 years ago. But what I've realized since then is although that kind of experience was intriguing, it was kind of a waste. It didn't take me anywhere. It didn't make me become a better Christian. It was about me and not about God.

Friends, I tell this story today because this morning we will be taking a look at meditation. Not meditation for the sake of accomplishing anything, but for the sake of drawing closer to God. For the sake of helping us to become more peaceful and more plugged in. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Seek God, not happiness--that is the fundamental rule of all meditation. If you seek God alone, you will gain happiness--that is the promise of all meditation." Friends, when we seek

the Lord alone, he gives us the things that we need to empower us to live our lives as his children and find our true contentment in him.

Scripture: Psalm 1:1-2 (pp. 489)

¹Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

²but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

Mark 6:31-32 (pp. 41)

³¹He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Reflection

One of the Hebrew words used for meditation in scripture is hagah (huh-gaw). It means to mutter or to ponder. Another word used for meditation is Siach (see-akh) . It means to focus your mind on something and consider it. Interestingly enough, the Greek word for meditate doesn't appear in the gospels, but the concept is still there. Jesus often goes off to deserted places to pray and seek the Lord's wisdom. Sometimes he takes his disciples with him, but often he goes off on his own.

Some faith traditions use the word *contemplative prayer* instead of meditation. Contemplative prayer involves quiet and stillness and is focused on centering yourself on God's presence.

Richard Foster says, "The church fathers spoke of '**holy leisure**.' It refers to a sense of balance in the life, an ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves."

The idea behind holy leisure is how can we go beyond meditation. How can we take the reflective practices of meditation and make them an ingrained part of our life? That is the goal of Franciscan Friars, to live a contemplative life that is centered around incorporating a form of contemplation in everything they do.

Can you see why this kind of lifestyle is problematic to the American way of life? How many times did you find yourself rushing somewhere or running late this week? If you're anything like me the more things you have to do the more you tend to rush from one place to the next. Friends, this kind of frenetic pace is something we have to fight against. **Rushing is the opposite of contemplation.** In a society always on the go sometimes the best thing we can do is to be intentional. We need to intentionally schedule times into our day or week to practice meditation and contemplation. I call this **setting a spiritual alarm clock.** Creating space so we can make room in our lives to be at rest in the presence of God.

Reflection: Mark

In our scripture from Mark, Jesus is doing just that. He's making space in the chaos. In this case, he notices the fatigue of his disciples. Our scripture tells us that "*They had no leisure even to eat.*" In the gospels, Jesus is not only aware of his own needs but he frequently shows an awareness of the needs of others. He looks at the disciples and says, "Ok, that's enough. It's time for a break."

How about you friends? Do you ever feel Jesus urging you to take a break? To go somewhere where you can find rest? To take time to enter into the rhythm of contemplation? God can do the urging, but it's up to us to respond to the things we know we need. If we are not intentional we will continue to "feel fatigued" to go without the things we really need- the rest and restoration of the Lord.

That's why Jesus invites his disciples to get away. He knows that they won't be able to find rest in their present environment. So, they get on a boat. Unfortunately for the disciples in this story, the crowd ends up following them and they don't end up getting the rest they need.

Friends, in what ways do you need to create healthier boundaries in your life? In what ways do you need to get away so you can seek God's wisdom?

We can create intentional spaces when we are alone without getting in a boat. Sometimes it's taking a car ride. Sometimes it's spending time in a quiet room. Sometimes it's going for a walk. These are the little ways we can create space in our lives for meditation and contemplation.

Different Types of Christian Meditation (Richard Foster)

1. Meditating on Scripture (a phrase or a verse)

Some people call this internalizing scripture. The idea is to take a phrase or a verse and to sit with it and let it become a part of you. The key to this type of meditation is to turn off your analytical mind and to let the verse speak to you like the advice from a close friend. You could take the verse, "Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10). You might ask yourselves, What does it mean to be still? How does stillness enable me to know God? Some people will focus on internalizing a verse for a few days or a few weeks. It's really up to you. This meditative practice turns scripture into medicine that is good for the soul.

2. "Palms Down-Palms Up" (Quieting Our Minds)

This meditative practice begins with our palms down. When our palms are down, we pray to God to release our worries and concerns that we are carrying around with us. **Palms down invites us to empty ourselves of our fears.** Next we begin palms up. **Palms up invites us to ask God to fill us back up with the things that we need.** You could pray, "Lord, I receive your peace about my future doctor's appointment. Or, "Lord I receive your spirit of forgiveness towards this person I am angry or upset with." Lastly, the final portion of palms down-palms up exercise is to spend the remaining time in silence. Be still before the Lord. Don't ask anything just simply be. If an anxious thought comes don't challenge it. Simply acknowledge the thought and let it pass, as you return to the silence. This is the time to "Be still and know that God is God."

3. Meditating On A Question (*Not included in Richard Foster*)

Sometimes a helpful form of meditation is to simply ask a question and

practice listening for God in the stillness. You might ask God a yes or no question like “Should I take this opportunity?,” or, “Is this the best course of action?” You might imagine there’s a yes or no box in your mind and see if God doesn’t light up one box or the other. This is perhaps the most straightforward way to receive divine guidance. You might also ask a question like, “What do you want me to do?” In all of these questions it’s important for us to create a quiet space and silently wait on the Lord for his response. When our mind gets distracted, we don’t dwell on the distraction but simply acknowledge it and let it pass as we continue to seek the Lord. Some days you might find the Lord responds to you in this way and sometimes it might feel like there’s no reception. But regardless, this is another form of meditation that can help to show us God’s plan of wisdom, peace, and guidance in our lives.

4. Meditating on Creation (Looking for God’s message in the sights and sounds of nature)

God’s creation has the ability to speak to us if we are receptive to it. Going on a meditative walk in nature or finding a quiet place to sit and observe can teach us many things. Author Richard Foster says, “Look at the trees, really look at them. Take a flower and allow its beauty and symmetry to sink deep into your mind and heart. Listen to the birds—they are the messengers of God. Watch the little creatures that creep upon the earth. These are humble acts, to be sure, but **sometimes God reaches us** profoundly **in these simple ways if we will quiet ourselves to listen.**”

In the *Canticle of the Creatures* St. Francis of Assisi says, “Praise be you, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures.” St. Francis spent a lot of time in nature and he would come to understand many things about God through all of creation. One thing he understood was that in order to have a warm breeze in the summer you had to have a cold breeze in the winter. In order to have Brother Sun shine down on us in the comfort

spring we also will have times where Brother Sun hides his face in winter. I tell this story because there's a lot we can learn from nature, a lot we can learn from the seasons about life. When we really look, and look again, God is often trying to reveal to us miracles that are hidden in plain sight. Friends, that is one of the great blessings of meditation-for God to show us truths in new ways that have been hiding just below the surface.

Conclusion

So may you take time out of your lives to take care of your emotional and spiritual well-being.

May you learn to slow down and create intentional quiet spaces.

And may the practice of meditation draw you into a deeper sense of God's peace, presence, and direction for your life.

Children's Moment: Meditation 4/28/24

Object: Gum

Today I brought with me some gum. What do we do with gum. Chew it. It's enjoyable and helps to fight bad breath. A good stick of gum lasts for a while so we don't want to reach for another piece.

Well, just like we want to chew on gum for a long time we want God's word to be something that we think about often, that we chew on for a long time so it lasts in our hearts and minds.

Today in church we are going to be talking about meditation. Have you ever heard of meditation? Meditation is when we take a break when our emotions are hard to handle. We could be mad, or sad, or worried, or anxious. Meditation helps us to feel calmer and happier. **One of the ways we can meditate is by repeating God's word.** The verse I picked for today is **"Be still and know that I am God."** So let's try closing our eyes, taking a deep breath, and saying this together. **This verse reminds us that sometimes all we need to do is quiet our mind, let go of our worries, and remember that God is in control.** So next time you feel overwhelmed I want you to remember this verse, "Be still and know that I am God."